

SLOAN LUBRICATION CELEBRATES 100 YEARS

FOUR GENERATIONS OF SLOANS HAVE GROWN THE COMPANY
INTO A LUBRICATION POWERHOUSE



The Sloan Team In The Early Days



BY SUSAN MARDELE

It's not often that one family helms the same company for a century, but Sloan Lubrication has achieved just that. Brian Sloan, the current CEO, is in the fourth generation of Sloans to head the company. He recently talked with *Gas Compression Magazine* about the history of the business and the new directions the fourth generation is taking the company.

THE BEGINNINGS

Three brothers founded a company called Sloan Brothers in 1922. Walter, Paul, and Ralph Sloan had distribution businesses in Pittsburgh. They joined forces and began to sell products for large-scale steel mills, most driven by steam. Their initial products included steam traps, steam actuators, steam solenoids, and water heaters for locker room showers used at the end of a shift.

Over the years, the company began to specialize in lubrication, initially selling lubricators for steam pistons and similar machinery. As the natural gas industry started to build in western Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Ohio, the brothers took on a distributorship from a lubricator manufacturer out of Buffalo, New York. The line included pump-to-point lubricators and box lubricators, primarily for reciprocating compressors.

The company slowly gravitated from a distributorship to offering a full complement of products and services. Sloan likens the company's legacy lubrication business to system integration. The company's operations department bought all the

components needed for a system. Sloan Lubrication designed the equipment, integrated it into a skid, and installed it in the field. Most often, the installation would be a retrofit.

Today, Sloan Lubrication covers full lubrication system integration, from designing and manufacturing individual components to designing complete systems. The company transports, installs, maintains, and services the equipment. Sloan Lubrication still performs retrofits, but now many of its clients are packagers, original equipment manufacturers (OEMs), or end users that have purchased a new compressor skid.

A GROWING ENTERPRISE

"The original office for Sloan Brothers was in downtown Pittsburgh," said Sloan. "The next move took the company to a Pittsburgh suburb called East Liberty. The company didn't have enough space to handle product integration, so the business moved into my grandfather's garage in Oakmont, Pennsylvania, where there was room for panel and simple component assembly."

Later the company moved to Oakmont to a 2500-sq.ft. (232-m²) shop space and office. In the 1980s, it moved into a space about twice the size, and in the mid-1990s, into about 10,000 sq.ft. (929 m²).

"In 2008, we moved into the facility we're in now, doubling our space to 20,000 sq.ft. [1858 m²]," said Sloan. "We thought that would be enough room forever, but we're up to



“Of the three brothers, Walter stayed with the business the longest. He was the quintessential road warrior, out and about every day and in the office very little. We still have some old records here. He always kept a day book, and every day he made notes of where he was going and what he was doing,” continued Sloan. “I think his philosophy was getting out there, meeting and interacting with the customer, and building relationships. A lot of that has continued even into the fourth generation with good, longstanding relationships.”

32,000 sq.ft. [2973 m²] now at our single facility in Freeport, Pennsylvania. Having the whole operation under one roof has been tremendously beneficial. The office, sales, manufacturing, and operations are right here.”

When Brian Sloan joined the organization in 2008, he was employee number 18. Today, the company employs 45 people. Under Brian Sloan’s leadership, the company has increased its field service employees, which has enabled the company to be more flexible and responsive to customer needs.

Each generation taking over the company’s business operations has contributed its unique perspective to the enterprise. Every layer has been built upon the last, adding dimension and depth to the company and creating dynamic growth.

THE FIRST GENERATION

“I never had the pleasure of meeting the first generation, the original brothers: Walter, Paul, and Ralph. I can only assume that their philosophy was to be a service-driven provider of reliable products, and frankly, a problem-solver for the market,” said Sloan.

THE SECOND GENERATION

Walter’s son, John, joined the company after serving in WWII. He was a traveling salesman just like his father. He favored red convertibles and drove them to sales calls. Under his leadership, the business shifted to selling precise lubrication systems for the natural gas transmission industry.

“In the first and second generation, Sloan was a distributor,” said Sloan. “We never actually saw the product we were selling. We would go out, visit the customers, and get the application specifications. We would then send those specifications to the factory. They would build it, ship it, and it would go out to the field.”

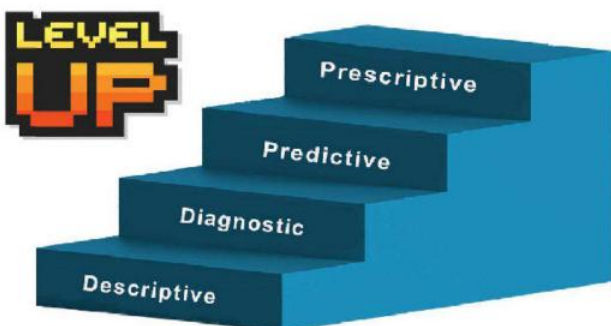
THE THIRD GENERATION

“My father, Walter Sloan, was the third generation of Sloans to run the company. His operating principle was self-sufficiency. He didn’t want to rely on any individual supplier or product line manufactured elsewhere. His main drive was to make Sloan stand on its own feet and be a master of its destiny,” said Sloan.

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Sloan Divider Blocks (Left) And Sloan Pressurized Pumps (Right)

“The name of the game from the mid-1970s through the early 2000s was to redesign all the individual widgets, pieces, and parts that go into our systems for our exact purpose,” said Sloan. “In the third generation, we began designing these pieces. In the mid-1990s, we started having all our components contract manufactured.”

THE FOURTH GENERATION

“In the fourth generation, we rolled out our manufacturing division. It closes the gap between customer interaction and the product they ultimately get at their loading dock,” said Sloan. “The gap is so much narrower now because everything is under our roof. Taking on that level of ownership of the product in that iterative way over the years puts us in a tremendously adaptive position today. Now that we have control over our product stream and have the total in-house ability to improve a product’s design, our focus is overall efficiency and waste reduction within the oil and gas business.

“There is a constant debate over how many decades it will be before renewables can take the place of fossil fuels. Our goal in the meantime is to make sure that the oil and gas industry, particularly the natural gas industry, is as efficient, clean, and sustainable as it can be,” said Sloan.

“Our approach is to eliminate waste and maximize reliability within our small lubrication piece that is part of a much larger industry. We feel that the moves we’re making, the products we’re rolling out, and our overall approach to providing products make operators’ everyday lives easier. Reliability is everything, so we drive reliability and efficiency. We try to reduce waste to the greatest extent possible,” said Sloan.

A CHANGING INDUSTRY

Over the years, the oil and gas business and the technologies that support it have changed, and Sloan Lubrication has changed with them. “The industry has shifted dramatically,” said Sloan. “In the past, if we dispatched a team, they could largely figure out the process as they went. Now, the burden of engineering and design on the front end is much more significant. We’re currently working with 3D modeling and have to factor in safety compliance.

“The increased focus on efficiency is another change,” continued Sloan. “What used to be a ‘more is better’ approach, especially from the oil delivery end, is now an optimization approach. We want to deliver exactly this much oil for this reason. Systems today must be more precise with much more upfront design work and specific engineering.”

FACING INDUSTRY CHALLENGES

“The oil and gas industry is critical to how we live our lives in the United States,” said Sloan. “Every person in the country relies on the industry daily, so aging infrastructure is the first and most critical issue. It’s an industry-wide challenge since much of the equipment currently in place is close to 100 years old. We’re seeing increased examples of pipeline leaks or explosions along pipelines. If we as an industry can’t get ahead of maintenance and reliability for our aging infrastructure, it will be an increasingly important issue.”

A second challenge is the shift toward renewables. “The public will continue to focus on finding more sustainable, cleaner energy solutions. As that focus necessarily turns to the natural gas industry, things like safety, waste, and efficiency will become an even greater focus for us. Our approach as a company is to anticipate it. The more we can shift our focus toward efficiency and sustainability now, the more viable the business will be for the long term,” said Sloan.

“The industry has taken some level of product loss for granted in the general course of operating in the industry. With some renewable energy initiatives, the focus on waste reduction will increase, and detection and mitigation of leaks throughout the industry will be the number one priority,” continued Sloan. “Legislation around this issue will be the biggest thing driving industry improvements.”

THE NEXT 100 YEARS

The Sloan family is already thinking about how the company will reach 200 years and how this generation can ensure that the business is healthy enough to pass to the fifth generation.

“I would love to leave the business in a position that if my kids or my brothers’ kids want to take on ownership or operation of the business, they have that option,” said Sloan. “We want to be certain that we’re providing the products to the market that help the industry improve. I’ve talked about efficiency and waste elimination. We’re on the forefront of that, and as the industry shifts focus, we want to be the go-to provider that people come to for these initiatives.

“I’m super excited about what comes next,” added Sloan. “We can set the company on a path and watch it come to fruition as the business grows. We get to watch our employees and customers benefit. It’s an amazing thing to be part of.” 